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Arts and crafts—not simply an expendable “extra”

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During economic declines and required budget reductions, arts and crafts programs are the first to be cut. Could these cuts be detrimental to economic innovation?

In their article, “[Arts and crafts: critical to economic innovation](#)” (*Economic Development Quarterly*, February 2014), Rex LaMore, Robert Root-Bernstein, Michele Root-Bernstein, John H. Schweitzer, James L. Lawton, Eileen Roraback, Amber Peruski, Megan VanDyke, and Laleah Fernandez theorize that without arts and crafts, the economy would not be as productive. That is, arts and crafts spark innovation, and without innovation, fewer products would be invented and fewer companies would be started, which would result in fewer jobs.

The authors explore the possibility that arts and crafts—including, for example, visual arts, woodworking, acting, dance, music, photography, electronics, and computer programming—foster economic development by enhancing the creativity of not only scientists, engineers, professors, poets, architects, designers, and others but also inventors and entrepreneurs. The authors list several studies showing that arts and crafts enhance innovation and creativity among this first group of professions but have found no formal studies concerning arts and crafts experiences among inventors and entrepreneurs. In this article, the authors explore the effects of arts and crafts on inventors and entrepreneurs.

LaMore et al. sent surveys to a study sample of 270 persons who were Michigan State University (MSU) Honors College graduates from 1990 to 1995. Almost all had gone on to receive advanced degrees and were employed in a variety of professions, such as professors, designers, and engineers. Of the 270, 82 returned the study survey and 44 of those were selected for further study because they were STEM (science, technology, engineer, and mathematics) graduates. These 44 persons were asked about their levels of arts and crafts involvement—the survey presented respondents with a list of 23 arts and crafts activities—from childhood to early adult to mature adult, and also about how many patents they’ve been granted, articles they’ve published, and companies they’ve founded. The authors compared the arts involvement of respondents who hold patents, published articles, or started a company to that of respondents without similar accomplishments. The authors’ findings revealed that MSU’s STEM Honors College graduates have a higher participation rate in arts and crafts than do the other STEM Honors College graduates; this participation appears to have enhanced creativity and innovation, which in turn correlates with the number of new patents and new businesses.

In addition, the authors compared the arts and crafts exposure of the honors graduates with that of the general population by using data from the National Endowment of the Arts. The MSU STEM honors graduates were much more likely to have been exposed to arts and crafts than was the control group.

The study survey also asked graduates whether they believe arts and crafts helped advance their problem-solving skills. Over 50 percent believe their skills were enhanced.

LaMore et al. conclude that if arts and crafts are eliminated or reduced in people’s lives, this would most likely have a detrimental effect on the development of not only the U.S. economy but also the world economy.

